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ABSTRACT

This paper first examines different conceptions of collaborative research. It then reviews problems and benefits in collaborative research as perceived by teams of researchers and teacher center/teacher personnel in 14 projects funded by the Teachers' Center Exchange at the Far West Laboratory. Criteria for effective collaborative research are derived from interviews with those who participated in the 14 projects. Aspects of development for both teachers and researchers as a result of these cooperative endeavors are examined. It is concluded on the basis of these pilot studies that teachers can contribute in multiple and substantive ways to a research project, but careful planning, adequate time, and the support needed to ensure rigorous data collection and analysis are preconditions to this effectiveness, as are those conditions and attitudes identified which contribute to this form of cooperation. (Author)

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REFLECTIVE INQUIRY INTO TEACHER CENTERS:

INITIAL OUTCOMES OF STRUCTURAL COLLABORATION IN FOURTEEN PROJECTS

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Reflective Inquiry into Teacher Centers:

Initial Outcomes of Structural Collaboration in Fourteen Projects

This paper first examines different conceptions of collaborative research. It then reviews problems and benefits in collaborative research as perceived by teams of researchers and teacher center/teacher personnel in 14 projects funded by the Teachers' Center Exchange at the Far West Laboratory. Criteria for effective collaborative research are derived from interviews with those who participated in the 14 projects. Aspects of development for both teachers and researchers as a result of these cooperative endeavors are examined. It is concluded on the basis of these pilot studies that teachers can contribute in multiple and substantive ways to a research project, but careful planning, adequate time and the support needed to ensure rigorous data collection and analysis are preconditions to this effectiveness as are those conditions and attitudes identified which contribute to this form of cooperation.

The Nature of the Collaborative Research Process

When the Announcement of Awards for support of research on experienced teachers' centers was first released in 1978 by The Teachers' Center Exchange at the Far West Laboratory for Research and Development, it called for collaborative research.

> The intent of the program is to award . . . subcontracts or agreements to conduct research that is collaborative in nature and that will explore exemplary practices in experienced teachers' centers. Such research should be of direct use to those who operate or otherwise support experienced centers as well as to newer teachers' centers which are developing programs. To accomplish this research, collaboration between researchers and practitioners is needed. This requires the participation of staff members and participants from experienced teachers' centers with a reputation for success, and the participation of skilled researchers who can collaborate with these practitioners on mutually agreed-on procedures.

By intent, the exact nature of the collaboration was not prescribed; the expectation was that several forms of collaboration would be proposed. This turned out to be the situation. The criteria for evaluating proposals included assessment of the "degree of collaboration between researchers and practitioners in preparing the project applicataion, and the strength of plans for continuing collaboration in carrying out the study." Thus, every proposal addressed the matter of collaboration. Fourteen proposals were eventually funded in 1981 and general findings from these research projects are reported by Dr. William Hering of the Far West Laboratory in this symposium and in a monograph titled "Research In, On, and By Teacher Centers." This paper is adapted from that report.

A very important aspect of collaborative research identified by those relatively few professionals who have participated in forms of collaborative research is some form of parity or equality in terms of just what

problems or questions are to be investigated and how. This concept extends to mutual responsibility for completion of the project, albeit different responsibilities. The Interactive Research and Development on Teaching (IR & DT) strategy employed by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development defined collaboration in this way:

> . . . collaboration is viewed as teachers, researchers, and trainer/developers both working with parity and assuming equal responsibility to identify, inquiry into, and resolve the problems/concerns of classroom teachers. Such collaboration recognizes and utilizes the unique innsights and skills provided by each participant while, at the same time, demanding that no set of capabilities is assigned a superior staus. It assumes a work with rather than a work on posture--the latter, in the opinion of the authors, being more frequently the modus operandi when teachers are asked to join researchers or trainers/developers in a linear research and development endeavor. (Tikunoff, Ward, & Griffin, 1979).

This definition of collaboration was consistent with that in the projects funded by The Exchange. Nonetheless, the roles and responsibilities which teachers or teacher center staff might assume in research or reflective inquiry will vary depending on these interests, commpetence and the time they have to devote to such efforts. The Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State has identified five primary roles that teachers might reasonably assume in collaborative research. These include: serving as a model of teaching for researchers to analyze; serving as a model and a participant, in which teachers' behavior is observed and where teachers receive feedback from the observer that in turn may lead to reformulation of the research question; serving as a data collector, in which teachers collect data and discuss and interpret the data with the researchers; serving as coinvestigator on the project, in which teachers participate in all stages of the research effort; or serving as a practitioner consultant,

in which teachers describe and analyze the teaching act and assist the researcher in formulating and conducting the research (Kennedy, 1979).

In the 14 research projects included in this report, teachers or teachers' center staff usually served as data collectors and assisted in data interpretation. In a few instances, they served as co-investigators and participated in all aspects of the research.

Time constrains again any full description in this paper of the various roles assumed by practitioners of the various types of research conducted. The 14 projects were characterized, however, by phenomenological inquiry employing survey instrumentation, structured interviews and both categorical and open-ended observations. The latter emphasized the different perspectives incorporated in these joint efforts and were filtered through different conceptual and experiential lenses.

The focus in this paper is twofold: firstly, to share problems and constraints of a pervasive nature which were identified by the participants, and secondly, to share benefits which appear more readily accrued than in research conducted by a single investigator or a team of persons characterized as primarily researchers. Findings in this sense are largely the perceptions of those who participated in the collaborative inquiry and were revealed through interviews, structured correspondence, and document analyses. The author relies heavily in this paper on direct quotes of the participants judged to be most representative of common problems encountered and benefits reported in the 14 projects.

The meaning of collaboration is enriched by their comments and adds to those criteria suggested for defining collaboration at the outset:

> Collaborative research is a process in which the parties involved work together on an equal basis. This sounds deceptively simple, but it's very hard as we are all

> caught up in our personal and professional histories and social perceptions of others.
>
> It is systematic inquiry into substantive, important, humanly real issues undertaken by skilled, flexible, creative researchers working as a team with curious, knowledgeable, honest practitioners.
>
> It is persons of dissimilar background working together with equal status on a research problem of joint interest. Different participants may be interested (and skilled) to different degrees in different aspects of that research problem.
>
> This form of inquiry recognizes and respects the theoretical base of practice and therefore grows from that practice and continually returns to it in a spiral that binds "researcher" and "practitioner."
>
> The key is mutually beneficial outcomes. The interaction which evolves thus defines collaboration; it is obviously not just putting people together. It is a process in which the strengths of all participants are drawn upon and all have a real vested interest in the outcome.

Discussions with those who participated in these joint research efforts revealed several common themes. First, there is a need for equality in status in the endeavor and a respect for the different contributions that each person is able to make (rather than the notion that each person contributes equally in all tasks). Second, dissimilarities must be viewed positively, however difficult that may be, as multiple perspectives can contribute to defining the problem, identifying how it can best be investigated, and interpreting data. It is more than a procedure of shared or divided labor. It is a developmental process of effective communication mutual understanding, and negotiated goals. Thus, collaboration occurs in the on-going dialogue required between participants.

As one of the researchers wrote:

> The great advantage of the collaboration was in the far richer fabric of ideas and concerns woven by the seminar in the design of the interview schedule. The interviewing was the most stimulating experience for participants

> although it may have suffered some by inexperience--blank tapes, inaudible voices, leading questions. The other major contribution of the seminar was in de veloping the coding scheme, working from the raw interview data. Again, struggling with themes, coming to consensus, was a demanding and time-consuming process, but ultimately more complete than if it had only been done by the investigators. Not only was the coding scheme itself more thorough, the processes of creating it required struggle and articulation and reflection on the part of all the participants about the questions of teachers' growth and learning, leading to new understanding.

In this respect, another participant writes:

> Speaking from my own corner, I was surprised to learn how much the collaborative relationship varied across the studies, and how one model could not possibly accommodate all the modes of working that evolved. I was particularly watching out for relationships that represented role shifts for the participants--practitioners who took on research tasks and perspectives, and researchers who accommodated to the demands of the practitioners' context. Although I don't think there is a direct relationship between the ultimate quality and value of the understanding gained from the effort and the degree to which the participants were stretched, I do believe the issue is relevant to the question of what is the purpose of collaboration. It is quite difficult to combine the acquisition of generalized knowledge and staff development--be that the development of the researcher or the practitioner.

This appears to this writer to represent a salient issue. There appears little doubt that different role groups in collaborative research efforts who have an openness to the mutual defin.tion and conduct of a study, guided by scientific canons, will be stretched and can learn from one another. The degree to which this either enhances or constrains the quality of the research is unclear, however, and there seems to be little doubt that such interaction runs counter to current norms for scientific inquiry and suggests time constraints and altered role-expectations for the great majority of researchers and teachers. This is not to say that we shouldn't push further in this direction, but rather that widespread prac-

tice or rapid development is not likely and that in several instances reflective inquiry as a form of professional development may be the more likely outcome than generalizable data.

Observations on Some Difficulties Encountered in the Process

The Rand study of federally supported programs designed to induce educational changes found that successful programs were characterized by teachers' sense of efficacy (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975). Similar confidence by teachers and teachers' center staff that their collaboration in research is productive and vital is also critical to the success of the research. If their function is (perhaps necessarily) limited to collection of data, this could compromise their status in the research project. Beyond this, there is a real danger that they could be viewed as the visible proxy for the "real" researcher in questioning or observing other teachers. Thus, a status differential rather than a functional differentiation of responsibilities can easily occur. This being the situation, the problems under study are not likely to have equal significance for all those involved.

At the outset of a collaborative project, teachers and techers' center personnel are likely to have less understanding of and ownership in the process. As one of the participants reflected:

> The practitioner initially doesn't know how he or she may acquire certain skills or insights; neither does he or she have any personal identification with producing a research report nor the rewards internally and externally which are associated with it.

Additionally, there is the problem of overcoming the mystique teachers associate with research. As another participant observed.

> There is likely to be a real lack of clarity about what is involved in something they have likely not engaged in before.

> Expectations are an important factor here as well. There is likely to be a degree of cynicism on the one hand as to what research can contribute; this is suddenly combined with the opposing perception that dramatic results will now be expected from their own efforts.

Yet another collaborator offered this caution:

> Teachers have to be sensitized not to expect dramatic results; they must be aware that the research process is, among other things, a process of sharpening questions and generating hyotheses. Expectations should be modest. Research can confirm the obvious (or at least what is obvious to you, if not others). It can also make what appears to be obvious more obvious. This is equally beneficial. Certainly, it will not always make the hidden or unknown clear. The expectation cannot be one of dramatic breakthroughs.

At the outset of the collaborative effort, there should be a relatively clear need for coming together. This could be a problem or an issue that both the practitioner and researcher view as important. Generating questions, gaining clarity about the problem, generating hypotheses, and selecting methodology--all should be done within the context of the experiences of practitioners.

Yet another potential problem is how to demystify research and, possibly, the perceptions practitioners have regarding researchers. While the emphasis in collaborative research is often on the needs of the practitioner (in this case teachers' center staff as well as teachers), it should be equally obvious that the researcher also may need understanding and some assistance, especially since he or she is also likely to be making a major adaptation.

As one researcher noted:

> Researchers have traditionally been involved in a product-oriented, efficiency-valued activity. A researcher is not likely to have engaged in any form of prior collaborative research, let alone with teachers involved in substantial ways in the process.

This emphasis on efficiency-oriented studies should not be underestimated in the higher education context. Practice-oriented, naturalistic studies can be time-consuming even without involving teachers in the design and analysis. Similarly, there is a question as to how much these studies are valued in the salary and promotion process when the researcher comes from a higher education context. Researchers and practitioners both make sacrifices. Adequate time is essential. A topic of mutual interest may bring the parties together; the dialogue needed to translate this into a research design is another matter. A rich percolation of ideas and continuing clarification of the problem will not likely occur if time is short.

One teachers' center staff person commented:

> I thought I knew what I wanted to know more about. I really didn't see the problem clearly. I cannot stress enough the importance of "making haste slowly."

A university-based researcher made a similar observation:

> When I recall what the major learning was for me, it was how really difficult it was to share with teachers; to work collaboratively. It took time and required me to slow down (I was reminded of when I played competitive chess and had to sit on my hands--literally--so as not to make fast, foolish moves). But I was rewarded by having their insights and their thoughtful reflection contribute so very much to the process.

And yet another researcher recalled:

> Semantics continue to frustrate communication even among like-minded people. I learned (once again?) that I must continuously avoid tendencies to "short-cut" in collecting and understanding the perceptions of others.

In summary, one should not underestimate the difficulties of collaborative research and realize it is very much an evolving process. To summarize, participants in these collaborative endeavors suggested the following:

1. A demystifying of research; a clarification of what it is and is not, orientation in research design and methodology grounded when possible in the topic to be studied, and agreement on how the practitioner can authentically participate;

2. Sensitizing practitioners and researchers to the realities of each others' role and context;

3. An opportunity for dialogue that fosters open sharing and interactive analysis;

4. Adequate time.

This list is hardly exhaustive. Other common problems encountered included the realization that there wasn't a shared interest in the problem; the difficulty of sharing leadership; ensuring that there are appropriate resources and clerical support, especially in data analysis and writing the research report, and maintaining continuity when multiple parties are involved.

There is no simple prescription for avoiding likely difficulties in collaborative research. Perhaps the essential prerequisites are that there is a commitment by both reseacher and practitioner to learning more about a specific phenomenon and a realization that there can be multiple benefits associated within a good working relationship.

Corollary Benefits of Collaborative Research

A common theme was the growth-producing potential of collaborative research for both practitioner and researcher. Several participants commented on this as follows:

> This process dignified the teacher role. It reinforced inquiry on the part of teachers and as importantly it reinforced the notion of how knowledgeable, how theoretical they really are. It forced all parties to communicate clearly and to clarify their notions. It was a real learning experience.
>
> I tend to believe that collaborative research is of greater benefit to researchers than practitioners/teachers unless

> a topic growing directly from a teacher concern is beat out of shape by research requirements. Researchers so rarely get the "inside view" of what they study and my experience is that it is a real eye-opener to see how complex and at the same time theoretical practice is.
>
> I think that everyone who was involved with our project tried very hard to see things through the eyes of the others. The collaboration was just excellent. It has changed me.
>
> Involvement in any enterprise in which you are "stretched," in which you make difficult decisions, are faced with nitty-gritty problems and in which you honestly look at a piece of the world and want to find out more about it, will contribute to professional growth. Both teachers and researchers grow in this process. The more the issues are related to their own work, the more noticeable is the growth.
>
> I must say that my respect for research has grown enormously . . . working on this team made me feel more professional . . . I am more encouraged than ever to continue my own professional growth and to continue others to do the same . . . I have become a true convert! Research has come alive for me.
>
> The collaborative research process obviously can provide psychic support for those engaged in it and a heightened sense of self-esteem and effectiveness (especially for teachers) as professionals. It is also apparent that this experience has encouraged teachers to be more reflective about what they are doing and suggested new ways for them to think about and understand youngsters.
>
> I am struck by the evidence that members of our team returned to their classrooms with a different point of view than they held before we entered into this research.

Many more examples could be provided. Participants in each of the projects enumerated personal benefits of one type or another. This should not be surprising, for it is likely true that there are elements of personal growth in any well-conducted inquiry. The dominant theme in these initial endeavors, however, appears to be the amended perceptions of reality gained by identifying and clarifying a problem with people in different roles, and

the thinking evoked by the need to translate experience and techniques to people unfamiliar with them.

It was also readily apparent that teachers involved in these projects acquired and refined various skills of formal inquiry. These are potentially useful in their day-to-day teaching. But is not apparent what baseline skills practitioners need to participate fully and with a sense of partnership in the collaborative proces . This will vary considerably, depending on the type of study conducted and the division of labor on the research team. It appears, on the basis of these projects, that teachers can contribute substantively to the collaborative process with minimal research skills. Multiple examples of their assistance in formulating the problem, assisting in data collection and in data analysis can be found in project reports. We conclude that:

1. Teachers can contribute in meaningful and multiple ways in the conduct of formal research with but minimal research training.

2. Both teachers and researchers report growth experiences from their involvement in collaborative research, especially when the conditions enumerated earlier are present.

3. While collaborative experiences might be intended for the growth of those who particípatae (especially teachers), there is nonetheless an obligation to generate knowledge that meets the canons of empirical inquiry and to involve teachers in enriching such investigations.

We suggest, then, that collaboration with practitioners can enhance the quality of research. In addition, collaborative forms of inquiry may legitimately be pursued as a growth experience. This is in no way to suggest that this can be done easily, but it appears that the rewards in terms of not only generating new knowledge but fostering further growth and

dignifying the teacher role are well worth pursuing the matter of collaborative research further.

As one researcher concluded:

> Practitioner involvement in research is not a magic key to insight. Our preliminary study does indicate, however, that practitioners do bring resources and styles to research that are special and can add important dimensions to data and analysis in some kinds of studies. They can use their everyday way of knowing and their backgrounds to inform and enrich the research. Care needs to be taken, however, to insure that their tendencies become contributions and don't lead the research into the nonobjective, nonrepresentational extreme that some might fear. . . . We cannot answer whether this collaborative kind of research will generally result in more adequate theory about practice or more useful research results, although participants of the center we studied said that results were useful and the process was much more agreeable than they expected. Certainly, the researchers and the practitioners involved will never be the same.